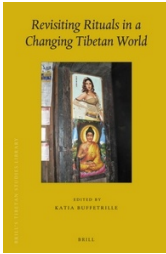


REVIEW: *REVISITING RITUALS
IN A CHANGING TIBETAN WORLD*

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Katia Buffetrille (ed). 2012. *Revisiting Rituals in a Changing Tibetan World*. Leiden: Brill. Volume 31 in *Brill's Tibetan Studies Library*. viii+386pp, b/w photographs, notes on contributors, index. ISBN 9789004232174 (hardback 182USD), 9789004235007 (e-book 182USD).

Featuring Buddhist ritual life in its diverse manifestations across the Tibetan Plateau, this volume engages the task of defining 'ritual' by analyzing moments of ritual change. Whether political regime change, technological innovation, or social upheaval, external catalysts of religious transformation have been prominently visible in the Tibetan cultural world since the mid-twentieth century. This volume takes up the sociopolitical shifts of the recent period as a call to investigate how rituals change under fire, thereby furthering our understanding of the relationship between ritual structures and the historical contexts in which they find expression. Ritual's intertwinement with political events, symbols, and attitudes is the resounding theme presented herein, as each chapter makes efforts to disambiguate the complex causes and contours of ritual change in a particular case study. Several chapters seek to distinguish deep structural transformation in ritual from the harnessing of ritual elements for single instances of political or social action. Others debate the ambiguous role of spaces, practices, or ideas that are employed in ritual but also in political or economic contexts. Finally, each chapter challenges in some way the polarization of ritual conservatism and the 'invention of tradition' (Ranger and Hobsbawm 1983).

Revisiting Rituals is an edited collection of conference papers presented at La Transformation des Rituels dans L'aire Tibétaine à

L'époque Contemporaine 'The Transformation of Rituals in the Tibetan Area in the Contemporary Period' held at the College de France on 8-9 November 2007. Like other conference volumes, this publication both benefits from the diversity of its contributors' approaches and is limited somewhat by a lack of consistency in presentation. In effect, this volume raises more questions than it answers. Nevertheless, each of its ten essays serves as an informed call for future research and offers an enriched vocabulary with which to proceed. Readers of *Tibetan Ritual* (Cabezón), which remains the best anthology of scholarship on Tibetan Buddhist ritual, will appreciate *Revisiting Rituals* for its broader geo-linguistic array and its careful historicization of ritual. This volume will prove a valuable ethnographic resource for scholars of anthropology, religion, and modern political and social history in Nepal, India, Bhutan, Mongolia, and China.

Hildegard Diemberger's "Holy Books as Ritual Objects and Vessels of the Teachings in the Era of the 'Further Spread of the Doctrine (*bstan pa yang dar*)'" details the 'double blessing' or dual agency attributed to Tibetan Buddhist scriptures: materially, their presence imparts blessing, while functionally, their content imparts teachings. Much of Diemberger's article is comprised of an historical overview of how Tibetan scriptures have been understood as agents or persons within the Tibetan cultural world. As material conditions have changed to enable the publication of scriptures online, on compact disk, and in western-style bound volumes, the question of texts' dual agency in the modern era comes to the fore in the latter section of Diemberger's article. Do compact disks have the power to bless in the same way traditional *dpe cha* format Tibetan scriptures do? Does a single painstakingly hand-crafted manuscript generate more or less blessing than 1,000 printed copies of a scripture? A question raised, but not answered in this chapter, is that of how the rise of woodblock-printing technology affected the sacred agency of scriptures.

Fabienne Jagou's "The Use of the Ritual Drawing of Lots for the Selection of the 11th Panchen Lama" outlines the history of the

golden urn lottery first established by Qing emperor Qianlong in 1792. She develops a narrative of the assimilation of the Manchu political aspects of the ritual with Tibetan religious precedents for recognizing reincarnate lamas, an assimilation that succeeded for a time but culminated in total dysfunction during the search for the eleventh Panchen Lama in the 1990s. Jagou analyzes the golden urn ritual's changing implementation over time within the context of a Chinese-Tibetan patron-priest (*yon mchod*) relationship; she then closes with a consideration of whether the ritual can retain any legitimacy for Tibetans in the contemporary political context, concluding that the ritual and its patron-priest basis alike are now effectively broken.

Thierry Dodin's "Transformed Rituals? Some Reflections on the Paradigm of the Transformation of Rituals in the Tibetan Context" contributes the most pointedly theoretical chapter in the volume. By drawing on three historical moments – the Lhasa riots in 1987, the incineration of fur pelts in 2006, and the mass long-life prayers for the Dalai Lama in 2007 – Dodin calls for a careful distinction between a ritual's 'transformation' and its application toward socio-political goals. Each of his three case studies involves a blurring of the boundaries between religious and political activity; his disambiguation of those boundaries makes a strong argument for scholars to employ more specific and thoughtful vocabulary when describing ritual change.

Fernanda Pirie's "Legal Dramas on the Amdo Grasslands: Abolition, Transformation, or Survival?" reveals the ritual roles of diverse mediators in nomad territorial conflict in eastern Tibet. She compares a contemporary instantiation of nomad conflict resolution in southern Amdo with the accounts of a similar event documented by Robert Ekvall in the 1930s and 1940s. Pirie calls attention to the new presence of Chinese Communist Party officials in the ceremonial signing of agreements and exchange of compensation that marks resolution between warring nomadic groups. Essentially, Pirie sees in contemporary Amdo's legal dramas the eclipse of the anti-order Tibetan ritual process of conflict resolution by a pro-order state-invented ceremony. Her chapter follows Dodin's well as it offers

further theoretical questions about a ritual's structural essence, transformation, and total reinvention.

Nicola Schneider's "The Ordination of *Dge slong ma*: A Challenge to Ritual Prescriptions?" provides a succinct summary of a complex, ongoing, and widespread debate among Tibetan Buddhists: the full ordination of nuns. As she considers the arguments proffered by various voices within the Tibetan Buddhist institutional community – from the more modernist Dalai Lama to monastic conservatives, and from feminist Western nuns to their less liberal Tibetan sisters – Schneider acknowledges the cultural and political factors at play, but pinpoints the crux of the conflict in the debate over faithful administration of the *vinaya* monastic code. Her study raises questions about whether canonical prescriptions for ritual life can be reinterpreted, supplemented, or revised in the effort to restore lost ritual traditions that are themselves also canonically orthodox. As this debate remains heretofore unresolved, we wait to see how Tibetan Buddhist leaders will creatively address this ritual conundrum.

Mireille Helffer's "Preservation and Transformations of Liturgical Traditions in Exile: the Case of Zhe Chen Monastery in Bodnath (Nepal)" describes the establishment of a new Zhe chen Monastery in exile through the lenses of its physical structures, liturgical schedule, translation and publication activities, and humanitarian projects. Monastic manuals from Smin grol gling and from the Zhe chen mother monastery in Khams ensure the continuity of tradition at the new Zhe chen, even as the monastery's outreach has extended to a global audience with the international touring performances of its '*cham* 'monastic dances'. Helffer considers the effect of the growing separation between the dances' ritual function and their aesthetic or promotional value when presented in foreign, non-monastic contexts. Despite this questionable move, Helffer argues, the new Zhe chen in Bodnath has effectively become the mother monastery and now defines the ritual life and character of the Zhe chen institution through its growing mandala of publications and patrons.

Katia Buffetrille's "Low Tricks and High Stakes Surrounding a Holy Place in Eastern Nepal: The Halesi-Maratika Caves" presents a thorough analysis of religious and political conflict over a holy site. Beginning with a well-researched history of land ownership in the area since the late eighteenth century, as well as the transmission of the hereditary office of *mahant* 'site guardian', Buffetrille narrates the role of contemporary Tibetan lamas in creating a new Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage destination of the Halesi-Maratika Caves. Buffetrille's chapter is one of the most robust in terms of the richness of ethnographic detail and the depth of archival research. In the future, we hope to see further discussion of one of the many facets of ritual change Buffetrille provocatively raises in her conclusion: the overlay of Buddhist mythology and practice onto Hindu religious sites, the establishment of a new monastic institution in exile, the changing ethnic composition of lay devotees and pilgrims supporting a site, or the effects of the construction of new religious monuments on a site's meaning.

Alexander von Rospatt's "Past Continuity and Recent Changes in the Ritual Practice of Newar Buddhism: Reflections on the Impact of Tibetan Buddhism and the Advent of Modernity" presents an overview of the contemporary status of Newar Buddhist ritual life in the Kathmandu Valley. His discussion includes a consideration of the growing presence of Tibetan Buddhism in the valley, particularly in Tibetan lamas' sponsorship of the periodic renovation and re-consecration of the Svayambhu stupa. Von Rospatt also notes the effects of Theravada Buddhist modernism, rapid urbanization, and the state appropriation of Newar land-holdings that traditionally supported the economic life of their religious sites. These threatening forces have sparked a general spirit of revivalism among Newari Buddhists, a spirit that von Rospatt sees manifested in several ethnopolitically motivated reform efforts. Among the aspects of ritual change he documents are the expansion of ritual access to a broader spectrum of caste groups, the inclusion of girls alongside boys in public ritual performance, the proliferation of ritual training programs and standardized manuals, increased translations of

scriptures from Sanskrit into Newari, and the addition of Buddhist elements to the Newari rite of passage ceremony for boys.

Marie-Dominique Even's "Ritual Efficacy or Spiritual Quest? Buddhism and Modernity in Post-Communist Mongolia" provides a cohesive historical narrative of the suppression and revival of Buddhism in Mongolia during the twentieth century. Rich in detail, yet fully accessible to non-Mongolists, her chapter emphasizes the contemporary climate of competition in Mongolia, as Buddhist institutions vie with foreign Christian missionaries for the hearts of young Mongolians. Central issues she targets include how Mongolians' desire for ethno-political identity formation following the fall of the Soviet Union affects the resurgence of Buddhism in the nation today and, in a related vein, the debate over whether Buddhist liturgy should be conducted in the Mongolian language rather than in Tibetan. Finally, Even provides an ethnographic overview of the ways in which Buddhist modernism and the demand for ritual services (often deemed 'superstitious') collide in present-day Ulaanbaatar.

Robert Barnett's "Notes on Contemporary Ransom Rituals in Lhasa" is the lengthiest contribution to this volume and condenses many years of research on *glud gtor* 'effigy offerings' in the quickly changing urban landscape of Lhasa. Like the other articles in this volume, Barnett's begins with a generous introduction to the historical context and relevant scholarship on the topic at hand. He then describes recent changes in ransom ritual practice in Lhasa's cityscape: the effigies have grown increasingly colorful and elaborately constructed; ransom ritual practice has moved from the home (where it was conducted in secret during the Maoist years) to prominently public spaces; and automobiles, especially those driven by Chinese drivers, now play a primary role in destroying the effigies and thus preventing the return of harmful forces to the homes of those who execute the ritual. Barnett contrasts the official restriction and subsequent denial of ransom ritual practice in Lhasa with a much more open environment for such ritual expression in Amdo. He also considers the conflict between secular rationalism and ritual traditions in Tibetan public spaces across the Plateau. Twenty

photosets with lengthy descriptions add depth and detail to Barnett's presentation.

One of this book's major insights is that while the modern period has been marked by particularly abrupt sociopolitical shifts, the same factors of technological innovation, resource access, political change, and human migration have influenced the life of religious traditions in all eras of history. By illuminating modern moments of ritual change, or perceived ritual change, these scholars offer us a vocabulary with which to discern transformations in ritual structure or function in other eras and contexts. Thus, scholars researching the distant past as well as those who focus on the modern period will benefit from the methodological contributions this volume makes and the questions for future inquiry toward which it beckons.

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